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ABSTRACT

Conflicts are essential for the development and socialization of preschool children and can benefit children even if they are not resolved. This study explored the events that precipitate disputes among preschool children and the strategies they use to resolve those disputes. Research was conducted at a nursery school with 24 children, ages 3-5 years. The children were observed 1 or 2 times a week for 4 months. Unstructured interviews with three parents were also conducted. Peer disputes were found to stem from two types of issues: conflicts of interest and unwanted physical contact. Conflicts of interest occurred when two or more children wanted the same "thing," whether that thing was a toy, territory, turn-taking, or attention. Unwanted physical contact included negative contact such as hitting, or positive contact such as kissing. The four strategies for resolving or ceasing opposition included assertion, conciliation, third-party intervention and disengagement. The children showed assertion through verbalizing, claiming entitlement, or appealing to rules. Conciliation attempts included submitting, apologizing, compensating, and compromising. Third-party interventions usually involved an adult who made suggestions for resolving the conflict. Disengagement strategies included walking or pushing away, verbally refusing to engage in a dispute, ignoring the provocation or censoring opinions to prevent a dispute. Results of the study showed that preschoolers' capabilities for dealing with disputes in creative, imaginative and anticipatory ways have been underestimated. (JA)

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Peer Disputes among Preschoolers:

Issues and Strategies

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Introduction

As a preschool teacher, I have seen three, four and five year old children solve peer disputes in the most imaginative ways. Once, a three year old boy accidentally bumped a girl on the head with a plastic shovel that caused the girl to cry. After consoling both children, the boy from the shock of accidentally hurting another child and the girl from getting bumped, I asked the boy whether he would give the girl a hug to make her feel better. His reply was, "no, but I like to give her some money sometime." Bribing is only one of many strategies that preschool children use when they attempt to resolve conflicts and disputes over toys, supplies, friendships, etc.

Objective

For many children, preschool is one of the first environments where they have to learn to get along with others besides their own siblings and a few neighborhood friends. For the first time they learn, practice and invent ways to negotiate disagreements with other children. In this study, I wanted to systematically document the variety of strategies that preschool children use to solve peer disputes. I wanted to know what events precipitated the disputes and how preschool children handle the disputes.

Rationale

Most disputes among young children benefit their development. Conflicts or disputes tend to arise from "incompatible behaviors or goals within an interpersonal context" (Furman & McQuaid, 1992, p. 402). Though some parents and educators may seem to perceive conflicts between young children as something to be prevented, avoided, or squelched, researchers found many positive functions of conflicts.

Piaget (1932) believed that early conflicts, or conflicts among young children foster a better understanding of others, thereby reducing egocentrism. In agreement with Piaget, Shantz & Hobart (1989) wrote that through conflicts children will have increased opportunity to learn both social connectedness and individuality. Rizzo (1992) found through his observations that conflicts provided children with the opportunity to work out the terms of their relationships. This implied that conflicts were vital to the cultivation of friendships. Through conflicts "children gained unique insight into their own actions and role as a friend" (p. 104). He further argued that some peer disputes between friends were initiated to induce positive changes in their friend's behavior. Ross and Conant (1992) agreed with Rizzo and believed that conflicts "hold great potential both for individual development and for the social organization of relationships and a group structure" (p. 153). Consistent with Rizzo's position, Furman & McQuaid (1992) in their discussion of conflicts within a family context stated that conflicts provided "open communication and lead to the clarification of the rights and obligations of different family members" (p. 403). Furthermore, verbal arguments seemed to help children recognize the perspective of another child (Ross & Conant, 1992). In short, conflicts are essential for the development and socialization of young children.

Although not all conflicts are necessarily constructive, all of the incidents observed in this study are of the constructive type. I did not make a decision to observe only constructive

conflicts. Rather, it so happened that no destructive disputes occured while I was in the field and none were reported by the parents interviewed.

I used Furman & McQuaid's (1992) distinction between constructive and destructive conflicts. According to Furman & McQuaid, the following indexes signal destructive conflicts:

1. Conflicts occur frequently and constitute a high portion of the interaction.
2. Conflicts tend to escalate and cover a rather long period.
3. There is a consistent avoidance of conflicts or consistent use of withdrawal and disengagement strategies.

None of the thirty-two incidents observed at Kid First displayed the above signals. Therefore, I believe that conflicts observed and reported in this study served the positive functions mentioned earlier. It makes sense then, to look deeper into the components of such conflicts and find out what really happens when two or more preschoolers have a conflict.

Methodology

Site

This study was done at the Kid First preschool in a small university town in the Midwest. I used to teach at Kid First. I left teaching there to become a full-time graduate student. To help the children make the transition to the new teacher, I volunteered at Kid First once or twice a week. I chose Kid First as the site of my study because I enjoy going there (I volunteered even after I resigned). I also expected that entry would be unproblematic since I knew everyone in that school. My expectation was confirmed when the study was approved without delay.

Kid First is a parent-owned cooperative nursery school. This means that about once a month parents come in to assist the teacher with teaching, playing and cleaning tasks. They are also required to serve in either the board, or one of the four committees: physical plant, new member recruitment, teacher helper or fund raising. Two different cooperating parents serve as teacher's aides each day. These "cooping" parents take turns bringing snack and juice and stay with the children the entire school day that begins at nine in the morning and ends at about noon.

Participants

Kid First serves two groups of children. The younger group consists of six boys and six girls, aged three and four. They go to school twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday mornings from nine to about noon. The older children, ages four and five, go to school three mornings a week on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. There are four girls and eight boys in the older group. I have known these children for almost two years. Before the study, I taught the older children nine hours per week for seventeen months. I taught the younger children six hours per week for five months.

When I sent out a letter soliciting parents' participation in the study (see appendix 1), three parents volunteered to be interviewed. I have known these parents as long as I have known their children. Since this is a cooperative preschool, I came to know all children's parents quite well. Parents came in every morning to drop off and pick up their children and most of them stayed for the first half hour each morning. They also stayed the entire morning at least once a month to help me with various tasks. Occasionally, I spent the entire morning with them more than once a

month if they came to help with field trips, which occurred about once a month. With such familiarity, trust was not an issue. The interviewing process was smooth and they were very open to tell me real stories of real disputes that they had witnessed at home and at school.

Data Gathering

I was a participant observer in both classes for the second half of the school year, going in once or twice per week for four months. I watched both sets of twelve children during my stay there and conducted unstructured interviews with the three parents who volunteered to participate in this study.

Since the children knew me as their "other teacher" and I ethically felt that I was first and foremost a volunteer there, not an outside researcher, I was always actively engaged with the children. Only after the day was over, did I write down notes. I realized how this active engagement might have affected the trustworthiness of my study. However, I felt that to suddenly distance myself from these children who had known me for almost two years for the sake of the study was not at all ethical. Furthermore, I agreed with Meltzoff (1990) who believed that any alteration or distortion of events due to active participation was balanced by the greater understanding gained because of the close relationship with the children studied.

The parents were interviewed once at their homes for one to five hours. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. I began each interview by stating the purpose of my study: to learn how children get along with other children. Then I asked them to tell me stories about their children that might help me better understand their children's relationships with other children, siblings and friends. I intentionally cast the question broadly so that discussions about peer disputes occur more naturally within the larger context of peer relations. The interviews ended in two different ways. The first and last interviews ended because it seemed that we had ran out of relevant stories. The second interview ended because we ran out of time.

Background Context

To give the reader a better sense of the physical and social context of this study, I will briefly describe a typical day at Kid First.

It was nine o'clock on a Tuesday morning in March. The three and four year old children were trickling in. They hung their coats on the colored hooks out in the hallway and went into one of the two preschool rooms to begin the day. On the large low tables in the center of the room there were puzzles, links, Lego blocks, wooden blocks, gears, and their favorite toy: the plastic letters that could be connected to one another and turned into a track for a battery operated school bus. Off to one side was a restroom with kid-size toilet and a low sink. On the other three sides were more toys. Several children played with the cardboard bricks, building castles and garages. A couple children played dress up and in the corner a small doctor was trying to give a patient a shot. A parent was pushing the red wagon around the room, passing the two children who were banging hammers at the construction table. Several parents were standing and talking to one another. Another parent was sitting on a small chair, working with several children on a construction project. The teacher, Mrs. Jones greeted everyone as they came in.

Kid First is a parent owned cooperative nursery school. Everyone seemed to feel welcome at this small school of twenty-four students. At the beginning of the year, parents were told that they were welcome to stay throughout the first free play period that lasted until about nine twenty or nine thirty. More than half of the parents did stay for the first half hour each day.

"The more we sing together, together, together . . . " Mrs. Jones began the cleanup song. The children scurried around putting away the morning toys. Parents kissed their children goodbye. The cooping parents encouraged reluctant helpers, and complimented hard workers. It was nine thirty, time to move into the other room, the activity room where everything was already set up for the days' activities. Mrs. Jones counted the number of children that were there that day, lead the group with another song and walked with everyone to the other room.

In the activity room, the day began with circle time. The children sat on the carpet around a circle marked with a piece of tape on the carpet. Johnny was the "special kid" that morning. He got to stick the day's date on the calendar and put up the picture of the day's weather on the board. Tomorrow it was going to be Susie's turn to be the "special kid" of the day. Everyone got a turn to be a "special kid."

Mrs. Jones announced the day's theme, "Spring." "Have you seen signs of Spring?," she asked. Several children raised their hands. Freddy was called, "I saw five signs of Spring," he said. "What are they, Freddy? Can you tell me one sign of Spring?" Freddy answered, "well, they are kind of, hmm . . . oh, I forget." Several other attempts were made and the lesson moved on. Mrs. Jones read aloud Eric Carle's Grouchy Lady Bug. She then explained that today they could make caterpillars from beads, butterflies from coffee filters and a lady bug out of felt. She showed the art projects one at a time. The children listened and watched, they were eager to make their own projects.

Mrs. Jones finished her demonstrations and the children jumped up to do their favorite activity. Soon everyone was busy at work. There were toys, blocks, kitchen corner, puppet theater, sand table, computer, a library, dolls and dress up clothes in this room too, but everyone was busy working on the caterpillar, lady bugs and butterfly projects. About ten minutes later, several children were finished with one or two projects and they began playing with the other choices in the room. A couple went to the library, several went to the house corner, and a few others began their second or third projects. Everyone was busy with something. The parent helpers and Mrs. Jones stayed at the different project tables most throughout the activity time.

"Does anybody else want to make butterflies, caterpillars or lady bugs?," Mrs. Jones asked the whole class. No takers, so she began singing another transition song, "time to put the toys away . . . " Some helped to put the toys away, others continued to play. Eventually, everyone washed their hands and a few used the restroom. Eleven o'clock, it was time for snack.

Snack time did not begin until everyone sat around the table where they had played earlier this morning. Everyone had their own laminated placemats that they decorated on their first day of school. Everyone waited very patiently in front of a cup of cut up apples, caramel pop corn, and fruit juice until the last few who were still washing their hands joined them. When everyone was seated, they began singing their snack song. The children chose to sing their thank-you in Thai this morning.

It is snack time. It is snack time.
Oh, what fun. Of, what fun.
Snack and juice from home, good for all our bones.
Kop kun mak, kop kun mak.

On other days they sing their thank-you in other languages, among them are German, French, Spanish, Navajo, Chinese, and Japanese. The most frequently requested language is German because one child in the class is from Germany.

Children talked freely and merrily with one another and with the adults around the table while they ate their candied pop corn and poured their own drinks. The only rule they had to follow was not to play with the toys around the room while snack time was in progress. After about fifteen minutes, Mrs. Jones asked the children to bring their paper napkins and cups to the trash bin. She then led the group in another transition song and took them back to the activity room for story time.

Mrs. Jones read Eric Carle's Very Hungry Caterpillar this morning and taught the idea of "metamorphosis." She showed a mobile construct depicting the different stages in the metamorphosis of the caterpillar. Then it was Johnny's turn again to do the special things that special kids get to do every day. He had brought some special things from home and had put them inside the "share bag." He gave his clues, "it's something with yellow and black stripes." "Tiger!" guessed the rest, almost in unison. The guess was correct. Johnny took four tigers of different sizes out of the share bag and let the others take turns playing with them.

It was about eleven thirty now. The children went out to the hallway to get ready for the playground. It was cold this March morning. The children held hands and went to the indoor playground as one long train. When the weather is warmer out, they go to the outdoor playground. This is one of their favorite activities at preschool, so they told me. The indoor playground is a large carpeted area of about 30 by 50 feet with a wooden jungle jim in the center. There were rubber mats, hula hoops, balls, cloth tunnel, and two wooden "boats" that rock back and forth around the jungle gym. The children took off their shoes as they entered the playground and lined them up neatly by the door. They were exuberant, full of energy and immediately engaged in various games, alone or with others. They played here until their parents came to take them home at about noon.

Terminology

Before analyzing information gathered in this study, it is useful to first explore the concept of "disputes." Rizzo (1992) suggests that we distinguish aggressive acts (physical or verbal) from social conflicts. Aggressive acts are aimed at injuring another person while social conflicts are understood as one person opposing another's actions or statements. The participants' goal in social conflicts is to "overcome each other's resistance" (Rizzo, 1992, p. 94). In this study, no such distinction will be made because it is not possible to accurately assess motives behind actions of three to five year old preschoolers. For instance, a child who intentionally pushes another child may do it to either injure the other child (aggressive act) or to overcome the other's refusal to give up a desired toy, in other words to overcome the other's resistance (social conflict). Indeed, the context of their interaction may help explain their motives, but I believe that without adequate

videorecording, such distinction may at times be arbitrary. As a result, in this study, disputes are understood as both aggressive acts and social conflicts.

A dispute "begins with overt opposition between individuals and continues until opposition ceases" (Ross, Conant, 1992, p. 154). According to Ross and Conant (1992), generally disputes begin with an "arguable event," which is understood as "the behavior, request or statement that is challenged" (p. 155). For simplicity, I have used the term "issues" in place of "arguable events." The arguable event or issue is generally followed by "initial and mutual oppositions" (Ross, Conant, 1992, p. 155) where a variety of strategies are applied. Finally, the conflict ends, either because it has been resolved or because one or both parties drop the case. In addition to such full-blown disputes, I have chosen to include brief oppositional encounters in my definition of disputes. Brief oppositional encounters are disputes where objections or protests are unrefuted. Though some researchers excluded brief oppositional encounters in their study of disputes (Maynard, 1985; Shantz, 1987), I am not alone in my inclusion of brief oppositional encounters in the study of disputes (see for example Hay & Ross, 1982).

Since the purpose of this study is to document, not to assess, the variety of strategies that children use in peer dispute situations, I will not compare the strategies in terms of their effectiveness in affecting the outcomes of the disputes.

To sum up, disputes are preceded by an antecedent event (issue or arguable event), followed by various acts to deal with the event (strategies), and end with or without a resolution. Issues and strategies are the two "thinking units" (Hofmann, 1995, p. 6) used to guide the analysis of text (observational data and interview transcripts) in this study. I have used the term "dispute" interchangeably with "conflict" and "disagreement" in this paper.

Analysis

In analyzing the text, first I broke down the entire text into textual units by identifying each dispute incident, from beginning to end, as a textual unit. For the sake of data management, I gave each textual unit a title. There were thirty-two dispute incidents all together.

Then, I went through the entire text and did a line-by-line coding approach where I identified on the margins what each line was about. Through this process I arrived at a variety of topics. I looked for duplication of topics and overlapping meanings in an attempt to ensure that each topic is unique. Labels were then given to name the final set of topics. With these labels in mind I went through the data again and color-coded segments of the text (conceptual textual segments) that corresponded to each topic. Then, I created a separate column for each topic with the topic name as the head of the column and its corresponding color-coded segments from the text as column entries. This was a way for me to keep track of the meaning of each topic as illustrated by the actual text.

Finally, I considered the list of topics again and tried to group them into larger categories by combining similar topics. I also read other conflict studies (Horowitz, Boardman, Redlener, 1994; Smetana, 1991; Ross & Conant, 1992; Collins & Laursen, 1992; Corsaro, 1985) to compare and adjust my categories of issues, strategies and interventions. I adopted and expanded the categories proposed by some of these conflict researchers. This process resulted in: (1) two categories of issues (conflict of interests and unwanted physical contact) that lead to peer-disputes

and (2) four categories of strategies that the children used in dealing with these disputes (assertion, conciliation attempts, third party intervention, and disengagement).

Interpretation
Description

1. Issues

Issues are antecedent events that precipitate disputes. I found two types of issues that lead to peer disputes among preschoolers.

Conflict of interests.

Conflict of interests occurs when both or all parties want the same "thing." The "things" disputed over may or may not be tangible objects. Disputes may happen over property (toys), territory, turn-taking, winner status in games, and attention or friendship status. In cases where the disputants wanted different "things," the conflict of interests lies in controlling the outcome or choice made in that particular situation. Over two-thirds of the issues observed fall in this category. Below are some examples:

- Bud grabbed the firefighter hat from Brian's head (property, 2/9/95).
- Rani said she'd get in trouble if she's caught on the top bunk [her sister's bed] without asking (territory, 4/5/95).
- Bud pushed Terry off the slide so that he could have a turn (turn-taking, 2/16/95).
- Terry complained, "I want to sit by Johnny but he didn't let me" (friendship, 2/16/95).
- Ian wanted to watch Power Rangers, Jane wasn't interested. She pranced around, making Ian nervous (control, 4/4/95).

Although there seemed to be quite a variety of issues as described above, I have grouped them together because they all centered on the issue of who finally got to control the outcome of the situation. This was the primary factor that distinguished the first set of issues from the one below.

Unwanted physical contact.

Unwanted physical contact includes both negative contact (pushing, hitting) and positive contact (hugging, kissing). These contacts may be executed knowingly by an aggressor without provocation or unknowingly in rough-housing incidents. Most of the incidents in this category involved the same child, Bud, who seemed to enjoy physical contact more than his peers. He intentionally ran into other children or hugged them unexpectedly as a way of initiating social contact. Control of the outcome was not apparently central in these incidents.

2. Strategies

Strategies are actions that immediately follow an issue and are aimed at resolving or ceasing the opposition. Though the term "strategy" may seem to imply conscious planning by the

executor of the strategy, a strategy may or may not be consciously planned. A strategy may simply be a reaction to an antecedent event, such as crying after being hit. I would argue in this case that crying is a strategy, even though it is not consciously planned, because the crying, in addition to expressing pain, is also aimed at ceasing the hitting or resolving the dispute.

I observed four distinct categories of strategies that preschool children used in their attempts to resolve peer disputes. Each category is unique and is made up of several different strategies (see Tables 1-4). More than one strategy may be used simultaneously in a single dispute.

Table 1
Assertion Strategies

- Verbalizing desire ("I want it")
- Verbalizing protest (with no justification: "Stop it"; with justification: "You pushed me, you're bad.")
- Verbalizing feelings ("That made me sad")
- Expressing feelings indirectly through a story ("Johnny [a classmate] was walking in the forest and then I took out my sword and my other weapons. I fought him and killed him.")
- Claiming entitlement ("I had it first")
- Appealing to rules: home rules, school rules or social rules in play ("We can't agree, then mommy and daddy get it")

Assertion strategies.

Horowitz, Boardman and Redlener (1994) define an assertion as "a unilateral attempt to get what one wants" (p. 86). I have adopted the same definition here but conceptualize "what one wants" more broadly. "What one wants" includes not only tangible objects, but also intangible matters such as peer acceptance or inclusion in a game, keeping a group game going, getting even with a peer who had just denounced one's friendship, and so on.

The strategies that children used to get what they want are quite varied. They used strategies as simple as saying "no" or "stop it" without any justification (quite frequently) to composing an imaginary story that eliminate one's dispute partner as in the example below (observed only once).

- Terry (4:6), Johnny (4:11) and I were in a small hideaway nook, telling stories. Terry told the first story. It was a ghost story about himself saving Johnny's life. Then it was Johnny's turn. He told a variation of Terry's story, except this time it was Johnny who saved Terry's life. "Now, it's your turn, Ms. Lokon," Johnny said when he finished with his story. Terry interjected, "No, it's my turn and then her turn." Johnny wrinkled his

brows at this unfair rotation of turns and said, "No more stories about me!" Terry ignored Johnny's exclamation and told this story: "Johnny was walking in the dark, dark forest. I saw him. I took out my sword and my other weapons and fought him and killed him." (Fieldnotes, 2-21-95).

I have included the above story to illustrate the range of variety in strategies that children used to get "what one wants." Other strategies in this category are verbalizing desire ("I want it"), verbalizing protest (with no justification: "Stop it"; with justification: "You pushed me, you're bad"), verbalizing feelings ("That made me sad"), claiming entitlement ("I had it first"), appealing to rules, either adult-determined rules or made up rules during play ("I said, 'time', you can't catch me when I said 'time'").

Table 2
Conciliation attempts

- Submitting/yielding ("Here, you can have it")
- Apologizing ("I'm sorry")
- Clarifying motive for action ("It was an accident")
- Siding with the aggressor ("I'm on your team")
- Offering compensation ("I like to give her some money sometime")
- Creating compromises or alternate solutions ("How about if some of the kids play outside and some of the kids stay inside?")

Conciliation attempts.

Conciliation attempts are strategies used to cease opposition by more favorable measures than assertion strategies. Others have called this category "negotiation" (Horowitz et al., 1994). I have expanded their notion of negotiation to include strategies that attempt to achieve conciliation without necessarily negotiating the issue. Offering compensation and creating compromises or alternatives are indeed negotiation strategies that are also aimed at reaching some sort of conciliation. However, it would be inaccurate to call the following strategies negotiation: simply apologizing, submitting or yielding to one's dispute partner ("Here, you can have it"), clarifying one's motive for action ("It was an accident"), and siding with the aggressor ("I'm on your team"). Therefore, I have labeled this category of strategies as "conciliation attempts" rather than "negotiation." The example below demonstrates that while negotiation is too narrow a term for this category of strategies, conciliation attempts is more appropriate.

- Randy (4:11) was about to cry when his repeated pleas to play something other than Power Rangers were ignored by the other four children. He kept saying, "Come on, you guys, I don't want to play Power Rangers, I want to play something else." By his fourth plea, he began to have tears in his eyes. Right at this moment, Marcus (4:11) who had been busy playing Power Rangers and ignoring Randy's pleas, stopped and said, "Okay, Randy, okay, what do you want to play? I'll play with you, okay? I'll play whatever you

want to play, okay? What do you want to play?" Marcus' voice sounded gentle and nurturing. He lightly rubbed and tapped Randy's shoulders while consoling him. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/1995).

In the above example, neither Randy, nor Marcus was engaged in a negotiation. Randy simply asserted his desire to play a different game and after a while, Marcus responded by submitting to Randy's wishes. Another conciliatory attempt that I do not feel falls neatly into the negotiation category is illustrated by the example below.

- Bud (3:3) was trying to find wrestling partners during the indoor playground time. He ran into people and intentionally "bumped" them with his chess as he ran into them. Several children yelled, "No," "Let me go," or "Stop it." When Bud ran into Terry (4:11), Terry yelled loudly, "I'm on your team, I'm on your team!" It is important to note here that there was no team game that was going on then (Fieldnotes, 2/9/1995).

This example, among others, has led me to expand the negotiation category to conciliatory attempts because Terry was in a sense trying to "trick" Bud into letting him go, rather than negotiating with him.

Table 3
Third party intervention

- Dispute reporting followed by a solution proposed by a previously uninvolved person
- Using adult authority ("It's time for Jane to go home, mommy. Can you walk her home?")

Third party intervention

Third party intervention is defined as "disputants accept a solution proposed by a previously uninvolved person" (Horowitz, et al., 1994, p. 89). Generally, the third party is an adult, but this was not always the case. It seemed to me that this definition only covers the strategy where the disputants are passive recipients of solutions offered by a third party. It does not, however, include the strategy where a child in dispute actually thinks up of a solution before soliciting assistance from a third party as illustrated in the example below. This story was told to me by Ian's mothers.

- Jane (4) likes to play with Ian (3:11). Ian likes to play with her too but sometimes he wants it to end. Sometimes he would say, "Mom, it's time for Jane to go home. Can you walk her home?" Last week, Ian and Jane had been playing here together for a couple of hours. It was four o'clock, time for Ian to watch his Power Rangers. He does this every day. Jane was not interested in Power Rangers and she was making him really nervous, prancing around. Ian told Jane, "I'm watching this and if you don't like it, you go home." On our TV we get it twice, first at four and then again at four thirty. So, Ian said to me, "Mom, I don't want Jane here when this [Power Ranger show] comes on again." I said, "Fine," and Jane agreed, so there was no problem. (4/4/95).

In the above example, Ian came up with the solutions himself before he solicited help from his mother. It seems to me that the understanding of the third party intervention category needs to be expanded to include strategies where the child's agency is recognized.

Table 4
Disengagement

- Walking away from a dispute scene
- Physically pushing away an aggressor
- Verbalizing refusal to engage in a dispute ("me don't want to fight")
- Ignoring provocation
- Censoring own opinion to prevent dispute ("mommy, I think Barbies are stupid, but I won't tell her that")

Disengagement

In this category, children engaged in disputes change the subject or activity or one or both children refuse to continue the interaction (Horowitz, et al., 1994, p. 86). These strategies include acts such as walking away from a dispute scene, physically pushing away an aggressor, verbalizing refusal to engage in a dispute ("Me don't want to fight"), and ignoring provocations.

The only other strategy that I felt was not accommodated by this category was a preventive strategy where a child censored her own opinion to prevent disputes from occurring. Technically, this strategy cannot be considered a disengagement strategy since there was no dispute in the first place from which the child wished to disengage. However, I do consider this as a disengagement strategy because the child recognized the potential of a dispute and chose not to engage in it. The example below was told to me by Karen and Jenny's mother.

- Karen (5:5) loves to play this Barbie game. It's very long and involved with sex-stereotyped roles, and I just don't like that. And I think Jenny (4:5) knows this. She said to me one day, "You know, mommy, Karen really really likes Barbie dolls, doesn't she?" "Yes, she does, Jenny." And then she whispered to me, "You know mommy, I think Barbies are stupid but I will never tell Karen that." (Fieldnotes, 4/5/1995).

Jenny chose not to engage in a dispute with her older sister, Karen, by sharing her opinions only with her mother whom she sensed as having a similar opinion on the subject matter. This preventive disengagement strategy need to be included in this category of dispute strategies.

I have discussed above the various strategies that preschool children used in dealing with peer disputes. I have also discussed the various limitations of the categorization of such strategies as understood by researchers on early conflicts. In the next section, I will discuss the implications of this study and directions for further study.

Discussion

Observation at Kid First suggests that these preschoolers engaged in peer disputes following two types of issues: (1) a conflict of interests over property, territory, turn-taking, winner status in games, and attention or friendship status and (2) unwanted physical contact, whether it is hitting or hugging.

Control of the outcome of the disputed event seemed to be the key factor in situations where there was a conflict of interests. In incidents involving unwanted physical contact, it seemed that the contact was made either by accident in rough-housing situations or made deliberately as a way of initiating social contact.

The notion that peer disputes could be a form of initiating social contact is consistent with the findings of Caplan, Vespo, Pederson, and Hay (1991) who observed peer disputes over toys among one and two year olds. They found that children's conflicts may be socially, not just instrumentally, motivated. Two-thirds of the conflicts in their study occurred when duplicate toys were available to the child that initiated the conflict. Hay and Ross (1982) found that in disputes over toys, the "winners" often abandoned the toy just won. I saw this happen at Kid First, as well. This implies, then, that some disputes are socially motivated and that parents or teacher may be doing their children a disservice if they indiscriminately intervene in such disputes.

The children at Kid First used a wide range of strategies in dealing with disputes. These strategies may be grouped into four distinct categories: assertion, conciliatory attempts, third party intervention and disengagement. Although these categories have been used in the literature to discuss conflict strategies of both young children and adolescents (Collins & Laursen, 1992; Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, Eastenson, 1988; Horowitz, Boardman, Redlener, 1994), I felt that they used the categories uncritically. They began their studies assuming that these categories as defined, were going to be represented in their data. This was indeed the case. However, I found that since I began my observations without these categories in mind, I was able to expand or redefine these categories in order to accommodate strategies that I observed at Kid First.

The assertion category needs to include strategies where the object of the assertion includes not only tangible objects, but also intangible matters such as peer acceptance, keeping a group game going, getting even with a peer who had just denounced one's friendship, and so on. It also needs to accommodate a wide range of strategies from simple assertions ("no!") to imaginative narrations that may not seem like an assertion.

I have proposed to expand the category of "negotiation" strategies (Horowitz, et al., 1994) to "conciliation attempts" to include strategies that attempt at achieving conciliation without necessarily negotiating the disputed issue. These strategies include apologizing, submitting or yielding to one's dispute partner ("here, you can have it"), clarifying one's motive for action ("it was an accident"), or siding with the aggressor ("I'm in your team").

Third party intervention strategies have generally been understood as strategies where the disputants are passive recipients of resolutions offered by a third party, usually an adult (Horowitz, et al., 1994). This definition needed to be expanded to include a strategy observed at Kid First where a child in a dispute actually thinks up a solution before soliciting assistance from an adult. He simply used the adult's authority to execute a resolution that he had thought up all by himself. In other words, the definition of this category needs to be expanded to include

strategies where the child's agency is recognized.

Disengagement strategies need to be expanded to include not only strategies where a child physically or emotionally withdraws from a dispute, but also preventive strategies where the child recognizes the potential of a dispute and monitors her own behavior so as not to engage in one.

In sum, I have argued here that one of the traditional framework which has been used to look at disputes among young children is too limited. Young children's creative, imaginative, and anticipatory capabilities in dealing with disputes have been underestimated. To remedy this situation, more open-ended observations are necessary. This study is one such attempt. More open-ended observation leads to expanded understanding of categories of dispute analysis. This is one way of sensitizing early childhood conflict researchers and teachers to the richness and variation of young children's conduct.

One area that I did not include in this study is the strategies that adults used when intervening in peer disputes. It would be interesting to compare their strategies with those of the children. Based on my observation of the wide-ranging strategies used by the children at Kid First, I am inclined to think that adults may be more limited in their creativity when thinking up intervention strategies. A comparative inquiry may lead to ideas and suggestions that adults may learn from preschool children.

A future study that looks into the relationship between issues, strategies and outcomes of disputes combined with effectiveness assessment studies may lead to information that is useful for parents and teachers. Increased awareness of effective strategies within certain contexts may contribute to better parenting and classroom management.

One last thing that I would like to include here is my conviction that conflicts can benefit the children even if they are not resolved. In fact, among children this age, more conflicts remained unresolved than resolved. This is consistent with my observation at Kid First, as well as observations made by Killen & Turiel (1991), Rizzo (1992) and Ross & Conant (1992).

It is interesting to note that in the present study about two-thirds of the incidents observed in the school setting were unresolved. However, almost all of the peer dispute stories narrated by the three mothers were resolved. This difference may reflect the nature of narrative practice where stories need to include a problem and a resolution, or it may reflect the adults' need to resolve conflicts that is not shared by young children. More systematic inquiry in this area may better inform parents and teachers about when to intervene and propose a solution and when to leave things alone.

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